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THE MASS PANIC OVER RUSSIAN POLITICAL INTERFERENCE THREATENS PROGRESSIVES TOO

Armed with potent propaganda, House Republicans are targeting the environmental movement over alleged Kremlin ties.

JIMMY TOBIAS · AUG 8, 2017

There are many reasons why the ongoing frenzy about alleged Russian interference in American political life is disturbing and dangerous. Chief among them: Political partisans are using fears about Moscow's machinations to promote reckless policies and advance harmful agendas. Just last month, for instance, we witnessed most Congressional Democrats vote for a sanctions bill meant to crackdown on the Kremlin. So desperate were they to penalize Russian President Vladimir Putin that they were apparently willing to assent to a legislative package that also included new sanctions against Iran. These new sanctions now threaten to unravel President Barack Obama's crucial Iranian nuclear deal.

Here's another example: Paranoid red-baiting has become a weapon for right-wing Republicans who want to harm the environmental movement. In late June, Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, chairman of the House Science Committee, along with one of his colleagues, sent a letter to the Department of the Treasury asking it to investigate claims that Russia is funding and influencing fossil fuel opponents in the United States.

"The Committee on Science, Space and Technology is conducting oversight of what appears to be a concerted effort by foreign entities to funnel millions of dollars through various non-profits to influence the U.S. energy market," the letter begins, adding later that there is evidence that Russia is "behind the radical statements and vitriol directed at the U.S. fossil fuel sector."

Smith's letter goes on to describe a Russian-backed "propaganda war against fossil fuels" in which "Gazprom and the Russian government have infiltrated U.S. organizations at home and attempted to sway public opinion and thereby government opinion."

"If you connect the dots, it is clear that Russia is funding U.S. environmental groups in an effort to suppress our domestic oil and gas industry, specifically hydraulic fracking," Smith said in a statement. "They have established an elaborate scheme that funnels money through shell companies in Bermuda. This scheme may violate federal law and certainly distorts the U.S. energy market. The American people deserve to know the truth and I am confident Secretary [Steven] Mnuchin will investigate the allegations." The Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund are among the organizations Smith says are being influenced by the malevolent powers in Moscow.

Smith's claims quickly found their way onto cable television and conservative media. The Daily Signal, Breitbart News, and the *Wall Street Journal* published stories or op-eds on the letter. Fox News' Tucker Carlson ran a segment on the allegations. A few mainstream media outlets covered the letter too. *Politico* published a piece on the issue, as did *Newsweek*. And the Texas Tribune, a highly respected outlet in Smith's home state, ran an article on it, though it admitted it could not confirm whether Smith's assertions were true.

Pacific Standard, on the other hand, can confirm that the congressman's claims are deeply misleading. Indeed, they are the product of a sophisticated industry-backed smear campaign meant to damage the environmental movement. If you read through Smith's letter, footnotes and all, and if you do a little digging, you will quickly find that almost all of the congressman's central allegations lead back to a single source with scant credibility. They are drawn from a 2015 report titled "From Russia With Love?" and published by a group known as the Environmental Policy Alliance. In a February column, I analyzed this organization and its report at length, writing:

The Environmental Policy Alliance, for those who don't know it, is an industry front group that was organized by Beltway communications operative Richard Berman. Back in 2014, Berman was caught on tape telling a roomful of fossil-fuel executives at a Western Energy Alliance summit in Colorado that they should view their fight against environmentalists as an "endless war." "You can either win ugly or lose pretty," Berman proclaimed. He then asked the assembled oil and gas representatives to financially support his "Big Green Radicals" campaign, an effort to ruin the reputation of environmental advocates.

As part of said campaign, which is still operating today, the Environmental Policy Alliance team published its 2015 report "From Russia With Love?" It centers on a foundation called Sea Change that gave tens of millions of dollars to groups including the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council earlier this decade. The report is largely an exercise in guilt by association: It highlights financial ties between Sea Change and a handful of Bermuda-based companies that, in turn, have ties to a law firm whose principals are linked to certain Russian oligarchs and energy companies, including the oil giant Rosneft. It's all a bit tortured.

In fact, the Environmental Policy Alliance's report never actually claims that the Russians are funding environmental groups in the U.S. It merely purports to raise "serious questions" about such influence peddling. Smith, on the other hand, a sitting congressman and the chair of a committee with subpoena power, takes the dubious claims of this fossil fuel industry front group and goes on to positively assert that "Russia is funding U.S. environmental groups in an effort to suppress our domestic oil and gas industry, specifically hydraulic fracking." What's worse, the congressman uses these claims to call for an investigation, one which could damage and hamstring legitimate civil society organizations in the U.S.

This whole sordid affair is an illustration of how easy it is for partisans to exploit a paranoid political atmosphere by using propaganda to damage their opponents. And that is what the Environmental Policy Alliance's report is—it is industry-backed propaganda being promoted by sympathetic media outlets and prostrate politicians.

In the end, even if the Department of the Treasury declines to investigate these drummed up allegations, Smith's accusations alone could damage the reputation of the environmental organizations he names. In abusing his power in this manner, in pushing a smear campaign into the mainstream, in stamping these claims with the Congressional seal of approval, Smith and the committee he sits on are giving the Environmental Policy Alliance and its industrial patrons exactly what they want. But for someone like Smith, who has taken more than \$700,000 in campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry, perhaps that's the point.

